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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the Curry CONNECT project at the University of Virginia, a Web-based discussion group that links preservice teachers with graduate inservice teachers and apprenticing administrators. Using content, survey, and interview data collected from the discussion postings and student feedback, a qualitative analysis is presented, examining the nature of the participant discourse as it evolved over the semester. In particular, the following questions are considered: Does the evolving discourse reflect the growth of a shared community of understanding among the participants? How does the motivation for participation affect the discourse and the development of a sense of a collaborative community? The following categories were determined to be important indicators that described a sense of participating in a shared community: motivation for participation which is primarily internal; awareness of the social context of the discussion group and perception of other participants as peer members; and the ability to acknowledge and appreciate multiple perspectives. (AEF)

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Curry CONNECT: How Online Discourse Creates Community for Education Students

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

Curry CONNECT: How Online Discourse Creates Community for Education Students

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How can fledgling teachers and administrators begin to develop the habits of professional collegiality and collaboration when the "closed door" mentality, symbol of the traditional K-12 classroom isolation, is also alive and well in schools of education?

At the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, we have been exploring ways of cracking open those doors by facilitating communication among education students through an innovative project, Curry CONNECT. Curry CONNECT is a Web-based discussion group that links preservice teachers with graduate inservice teachers and apprenticing administrators.

In this paper, we will report on what we're learning from this project. Using content, survey, and interview data collected from the discussion postings and student feedback, we will present a qualitative analysis examining the nature of the participant discourse as it evolved over the semester. In particular, we will consider the following questions: Does the evolving discourse reflect the growth of a shared community of understanding among the participants? How does the motivation for participation affect the discourse and the development of a sense of a collaborative community?

Perspectives

Curry CONNECT – Rationale

One important result of the practice of university teacher education students working in isolation is the lack of opportunity for them to interact with each other about important concepts and issues. Student-to-student interaction usually occurs within a classroom through cooperative projects or discussion but rarely goes beyond the classroom. Preservice teacher education students have little time to communicate with one another or with experienced teachers when they observe or student teach in K-12 classrooms. Seldom, if ever, do they have the opportunity to exchange ideas with administrators. Yet we accept as the basis for much of what we teach today in education that real learning takes place in a social context. From Dewey (1916) and Vygotsky (1978), we have developed learning theory which is predicated on the idea that knowledge is socially constructed. As learners, we are actively engaged in the production of shared "communal understandings" which help us to derive meaning from everyday messy, puzzling experience. Through encounters with multiple perspectives, we acquire mature and mutual understandings about the nature of reality (Sugar & Bonk, 1995). By providing future educators of all stripes with a common social context in which to discuss ideas and build meaning, we can facilitate their learning. We believe that technology has the capacity to bring together such diverse groups of students-in different classes with varying degrees of experience-to exchange ideas and knowledge.

Curry CONNECT – Design

The instructors of seven educational technology courses (four undergraduate classes, three graduate classes) created a Web-based discussion group, Curry CONNECT, for their students to engage in online discussions about issues related to the use of technology in education. The underlying purpose of the Curry CONNECT project, however, was to build a virtual "community" in which preservice teachers, inservice teachers and interning administrators could develop the understanding that they are part of a larger educational community which can provide them with support, challenge, and an enriched social context for learning. An electronic link among the classes was selected as the best method for creating this perception (Bonk, Appleman, & Hay, 1996).

Students accessed the Curry CONNECT Website to discuss common readings about educational technology designated by the instructors. The Website is available at the following URL: http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/connect. After an initial "practice" discussion in which

students could post and respond to any idea, we held three discussions based on common readings.

Methods

Participants

The classes were comprised of the following students:

- *Introduction to Educational Technology* (Undergraduate, four sections-primarily preservice elementary and secondary teacher education students)
- *Instructional Computing* (Graduate, one section-primarily graduate teacher education students, most of whom were experienced teachers)
- *Educational Software Applications* (Graduate, one section-a diverse group of students from the entire university)
- *Problems in School Business: Computer Applications* (Graduate, one section-experienced teachers and administrative interns working on graduate degrees in school administration)

These students offered a breadth of classroom experience to the discussion group, ranging from those who had only observed in classrooms to those who had taught for many years. It also included a contingent of students from other schools of the university who were not interested in becoming teachers. Mostly undergraduates, these students represented the important constituencies of future parents, business leaders, and other professionals for the education students in the group.

Data Collection and Analysis

Curry CONNECT consisted of the participating classes (approximately 140 students total) and seven instructors. Participants were identified by their "roles" within this educational community: Preservice teachers, experienced teachers, administrators, those characterized as community members (non-education students), and Instructors.

In addition to follow-up surveys provided to the entire population of students, we selected two students from each class, who had posted to the discussion group, to follow during the course of the semester. These students, or "posters," were interviewed following each discussion to gain insight into their views on the nature of the discussion, what they learned from the experience, and how they felt about the other participants in the discussion. "Non-posters" from each group were to be selected and interviewed at the end of the semester course to determine reasons why they chose not to participate. Finally, instructors from two of the courses were interviewed.

The results of the surveys, the interviews, and a discourse analysis on all of the posted students' responses were examined qualitatively with particular emphasis on the following questions:

1. Does the motivation for participation affect the quality of discourse and the development of a sense of participating in learning community?
2. Is there evidence that the evolving discourse reflects a sense of community (shared communal understanding) among the participants?

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Interviews and postings were analyzed and content analysis was performed. The following categories were determined to be important indicators that respondents were describing a sense of participating in a shared community:

- Motivation for participation which is primarily internal
- Awareness of the social context of the discussion group and perception of other participants as peer members
- The ability to acknowledge and appreciate multiple perspectives

Discussion One. "The Computer Delusion" (Oppenheimer, 1997) provided the topic for discussion. A link was available from the Curry CONNECT site to an online version of the article at: http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97jul/computer.htm.

This was a relatively straightforward discussion arising from a single reading. Responses provided a lively back and forth debate surrounding the issues raised in the article with participants about evenly split either for or against the author's position. The following are excerpts from the discussion:

> We all agree our children will need more computer skills in the future and we probably all agree that we need to spend more money on education in general, so why not use capitalism's competitive nature to solve all of our problems. Let the public sector spend more on the traditional programs and let the private provide the rest. (Experienced teacher's posting)

> ... your argument of private vs. public spending sounds great on the surface, but what about the long-term effects? Won't this cause great disparity among schools? The richer schools will get richer and the poor school districts will remain poor. We... will create a greater disparity among schools than what we presently have. Is this fair to all students? I don't think school choice is the answer to this dilemma either. It is our obligation as a free society to provide an equal education to all of our youth. (Administrator's response)

Discussion Two. The general topic was Censorship and Copyright Issues. Links were provided to several sites that provided information and articles on these issues at: http://curry.edschool.Virginia.EDU/go/connect/discussions/

copyright/auprdgs.html. The format was somewhat less structured since students were required to look up a number of resources and links in order to develop their own understanding of the issues.

Although the format was more problematic for some students, participation was high and multiple perspectives were evident in the series of postings. The following example demonstrates one discussion strand that arose about "censorship" on the Web:

> ...Part of the skill required to make the Internet experience into a meaningful learning experience for the student, teacher or parent is found in gaining the ability to discern. Access to the Internet-and all it has to offer-is growing exponentially. I don't believe that we could or should exercise control over users' exposure... (Preservice teacher's posting)

> I'm not sure that I agree-though in theory I think your ideas are marvelous, I can see a lot of adolescents not grasping the deeply rooted concept. Education about the craziness that exists on the net should certainly be addressed, but I'm not sure that would keep an eager adolescent from learning too much too quickly. (Experienced teacher's response)

> I met a man once who was very disconcerted by television sets. He did not give the normal speech about TV being trash or a waste of time or not educational. He saw televisions as a very disturbing invasion of privacy. He said, "Yesterday when I came home from work a strange man I had never seen before was talking to my daughter in the living room."...I think the fact that TV and computers allow millions of strangers into our lives is indeed quite disturbing. I do not believe that the net should be censored but I do not believe that it has much of a place in schools...Internet access in schools is like having tax-funded strip dancers in off limits classrooms. (Community member's comments)

Motivation for Participation

We asked participants what initially motivated them to participate. Interest in the topic was given as the primary reason by most participants as indicated below:

> I think that the impetus behind my posting in that particular circumstance was based upon the article itself. I was so enraged by the opinions put forth [in the article]. (Experienced teacher)

> I think that I read the article, and I thought it was interesting, so I wanted to comment on it. (Preservice teacher)

> I've always heard things about censorship on the web, and I wanted to look into it. When I did I went to a lot of the sites, and I was really surprised with what I found. I think I gave some examples in what I wrote-the things that really shocked me. (Preservice teacher)

Of equal importance to respondents was finding out what other people thought:

> I think I was interested in seeing if other people saw things the same way I did. (Preservice teacher)

> I was curious to see what other people posted. (Experienced teacher)

Although most students noted that there were course expectations or requirements for their participation in the discussion group, only one mentioned this as the sole motivation for involvement.

> I liked the topic, but the only reason that I posted was because it was part of an assignment. (Community member)

Instructors cited the importance of responding to their own students' posts as their main motivation for posting to the discussion group. One wrote "...it's very difficult for people when they post something and don't get a response at all. It's one of the worst feelings in the world to not get a response from anybody. You start to wonder whether you had anything worthwhile to say or what folks' reactions are to your message."

With one exception ("I did not want to see the responses people might have given to my particular response."), all of the student participants reported that, indeed, they were motivated to return to the discussion on several occasions after they had posted in order to find out what others may have responded to them.

> I wanted to see if people had responded to what I had written. And it was new to me-the whole newsgroup thing, so I just wanted to see how it worked. So I looked at some people's comments. Not just who had responded to me, but some people that I knew-I wanted to know what they thought of it. (Experienced teacher)

> I returned [several times] to see if there was reaction to my posting. (Administrator)

Internal/External Motivation

All students taking part in Curry CONNECT discussion groups were presented with some form of extrinsic motivation for participating. Reading the common resources and posting to the discussion group was required, suggested, or encouraged by the course requirements in all of the classes. It was, therefore, a matter of interest to examine the effect of these requirements on student motivation.

Two classes were given the option of either posting to the discussion group or submitting a reading reaction paper

to their instructor. In the third class, students were "strongly encouraged" to post although there was no mandatory requirement that they do so. In the fourth class while again there was no mandatory requirement for posting, two extra credit points were awarded to students who joined in an online discussion.

An analysis of the interview data suggests that for the non-education students, required participation became the chief motivating factor in their involvement; whereas for those students engaged in education and anticipating a career in the field, interest in the discussion topics and themes was cited as more important or equally important. Except for one student, all respondents were motivated to return to view the discussions thereafter more than once.

Table 1.
Comparison of motivations to participate

Awareness of Social Context

We were curious about the participants' perceptions of the other members of the CONNECT group.As one instructor interviewed put it:

> ...obviously the literature shows that when you have familiarity with people, you know the person, that there is more of a chance that you would talk to them again, and the same on the Internet. It opens the chance to talk to a whole bunch of different people, but given the choice of talking with somebody you know and somebody you don't know, you're more likely to talk to somebody you know-unless somebody you don't know really says something controversial and you just absolutely have to respond to them.

All respondents were clear that they felt the Web discussion was a significantly different experience than a face-to-face encounter.

Some students clearly didn't feel that they were involved in a "discussion:"

> I didn't really feel like I was participating in a discussion. I thought I was just putting on a comment to see how other people would respond to it. (Preservice teacher)

> I did not get the feeling that I was participating in a real discussion. I consider a discussion more than just a written response to somebody else's thoughts. (Community member)

Several, however, did indicate that they felt there was a conversation taking place and especially approved of the asynchronous nature of the format:

> But yes, I think I thought I was participating in a discussion. That it was there. Those that were interested in a topic could read, react and that type of thing...It was very convenient in that you could do it on your own schedule and time. (Administrator)

At least three students we talked with appeared to find both liberation and the ability to reflect in this form of discussion.

> I thought it was pretty close to what you have in class. Except you do have the time to actually think - ....I think I wrote in things that I wouldn't have said in person. (Preservice teacher)

> ...although there will be certain tones and moods when you can note from the reading. Writing is a physical manifestation of spiritual thought and there's a transformation that occurs from the thought to the paper. I guess that what I'm trying to point out is that when we read someone else's writing we read it in their voice. That's why you get a sense of a person's mindset. That's why it is a viable level of communication-discussion groups. We're touching one another. (Experienced teacher)

> It's more than just words on a screen. It's really communicating. Writing is thinking. Sometimes I don't know what I think until I write it down. (Experienced teacher)

Acknowledgement of Multiple Perspectives

One of the most crucial themes to our investigation into the nature of how a community builds relationships and constructs meaning arises out of the apprehension of the multiple perspectives which can only present themselves in a social context. There was evidence from our respondents that such a process was beginning to take place.

> I have to admit I was surprised. You get so insular sometimes-as we all do all the time in education in general-and you forget that there's a whole world out there that doesn't read the same books, use the same jargon, share the same ideas. (Experienced teacher)

> I think a lot of people felt the way I did-they just felt more comfortable writing it than would just raising their hand and saying it. I think you got a lot of different opinions. I didn't expect a lot of different opinions. (Preservice teacher)

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It helped to give me some insight to their ideas and views which a lot of the time were different from mine. (Preservice teacher)

By reading the responses of other people, I was exposed to different views and opinions than my own. Word choices and tones conveyed in the postings helped me see where the students were coming from. (Community member)

Future Research

We will continue to investigate the extent to which our results indicate that the Curry CONNECT discussion group succeeds in its mission of creating a "shared community of understanding" among education students and make adjustments to its use as necessary. As in the real world, we will need to be sensitive to finding ways to involve community members more thoroughly in our mutual meaning making.

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